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ABSTRACT

This series of three brief articles, written by the Nebraska commissioner of education, addresses schools for the future. It proceeds with two assumptions: (1) all students can learn and can learn at much higher levels than they are now doing; and (2) schools should be ready and able to teach all kids. The first article addresses, generally, the kind of schools the American school system needs but does not have. The second article, written from a Nebraskan perspective and framed in a Nebraskan context, discusses why a new generation of schools is needed and why these schools are needed as soon as possible. The third article discusses models and strategies for making needed changes. The three articles are framed around seven major operating principles that describe schools for the future, principles around which these schools should be organized. The principles are: (1) child- and family-centered; (2) learning- and learner-centered; (3) strong focus on the basics plus; (4) integrated/connected to community-based support services; (5) developmentally organized; (6) organized around learning families and teaching teams; and (7) achievement certified by demonstration. (WFA)

Schools for Our Future
[Part One and] Part Two: Why Do We Need Them?
[and]
Part Three: How Do We Get Them?

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SCHOOLS FOR OUR FUTURE

by Douglas D. Christensen, Ph.D.
Commissioner of Education

This is the first in a series of three articles written especially for *NCSA Today* to address "schools for our future." The first article will discuss the kind of schools we need but do not have. The second article will address why we need to make changes in Nebraska schools and why we need top quality schools. Finally, the third article will discuss models and strategies for making the changes needed. The kind of schools we need (but do not have) will be discussed first so subsequent articles about why we need to change and how we make the necessary changes will be in reference to where we need to go.

Let's begin with a time reference -- we need these schools ASAP -- *in fact, we need them now!* We must proceed with making the changes needed at a pace that ensures reasonable progress in a reasonable amount of time. There is an urgency about this change, and this urgency will be discussed more in the second article.

The pace of change must be such that it allows for public engagement, professional reflection, development and design, and careful strategic planning. A decade of changes will be required, so let's think in terms of schools in the year 2006. Our discussion of schools for our future in the year 2006 begins with two assumptions:

- All students can learn and can learn at much higher levels than they are now doing.
- Schools should be ready and able to teach all kids.

So, what would this school for our future that *embraces all kids, produces higher levels of achievement, and holds greater capacity to teach* look like? This will not be a description of the physical features or facilities, but rather a discussion of how this school for our future will be organized and how it will function. Each descriptor is as important as the next -- there is no hierarchy of importance. Each descriptor is interactive with and complementary to the others. The descriptors should be thought of as a whole and should serve as an example that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." It is the presence of, and interaction among, *all* of them that causes this school for our future to be what it is.

Child and Family Centered

Children are first and foremost members of families. Families are the first, the primary, and the lifelong point of reference and reality for children. In the early and adolescent years this point of reference is exceptionally strong and often exclusive. Its strength and exclusivity will diminish in adulthood when the individuals have their own families and/or include more individuals and groups into their points of reference and reality.

Child and family centered schools recognize the needs of the child and family and find ways to address them so that (1) the child comes to school ready to learn and (2) the family is strengthened and becomes an increasingly effective source of support for the developing/learning child. Consider the fact that from birth to graduation a child will spend 9% of the time in school, while 91% of the time is spent outside of school, and the vast majority of that non-school time is spent in and with the family. *Families are important.*

Also, we would benefit by recognizing that parents do love their children as much as they are capable, and they care for and about their children as much as they are capable. Not all parents have the same capacity to love and care, to nurture and support. We cannot excuse children and families from their commitment to learning and achieving school success. We also cannot excuse our inability to succeed in teaching all kids. We must constantly renew our commitment to all children, our belief in their ability to learn, and our capacity to teach. All children deserve our best. Parents and schools must work together and support each other so that children have the best childhood possible, so that parents are supportive of learning and send their children off to child-centered schools that meet the learning needs of all students.

Learning and Learner Centered

Where learning is primary, there is nothing about schools that is hostile to children. Children deserve schools where all those involved -- parents, board members, superintendents, principals, teachers, support staff, and hopefully students! -- know why they are in school, what they are to do while they're there, and that success in school is defined in terms of what they learn.

It is said that good schools focus on only four things:

- Children -- *what* they should learn.
- Children -- *how* they learn.
- Children -- what and how they are *taught*.
- Children -- *how well* they learn what they are supposed to learn.

Strong Focus on the *Basics Plus*

A quality education ensures that all children learn to read and write and learn the knowledge, skills, and applications of math, science, the social sciences, and literature. The *Basics Plus* not only includes that focus, but also ensures that learners can think, make decisions, analyze information, evaluate choices, solve problems, and work with others. We teach the *Basics Plus* to prepare our students (1) to continue learning

outside of school, (2) to enter the workforce and be independent self-sustaining earners, and (3) to participate effectively in our democratic society. The operative word is *prepare*.

Integrated/Connected to Community-Based Support Services

Schools should not be the providers of non-education-related support services. Ideally these support services should be community-based and school-linked. Some communities, however, lack the capacity and resources to provide all the needed supports.

In such cases, schools have few choices but to provide those critical services needed by children and/or their families. If the community has not provided them and the schools do not provide them, the child may not be able to learn. When schools are unable to teach children because a support service is needed and not available or not provided, the role of the school shifts to care giver or babysitter, and we are not in the babysitting business. In such cases, schools need to directly provide support in order to get to the job of teaching and learning.

Developmentally Organized Continuous Progress

Most schools are organized by grades, but grades represent age levels of students, not learning levels. Our assumptions about the age-grade organization of schools may have been valid in the past, but today we see greater differences among our students in maturity, learning levels, and learning abilities. Differences among children should not be viewed as defects or deficits, and it really doesn't matter the cause of the differences. What matters is how we respond.

Education does not homogenize differences. In fact, successful education makes differences greater, not less. Age-grade organizational patterns with great disparities among children in the same group present all kinds of teaching problems, and as the disparities become greater and as children move through the grades, the problems are compounded.

Learning would be greater and teaching would be more effective if learning groups were as close as possible in their development, past learning, and place in the curriculum sequence. Such learning requires we abandon age-grade grouping patterns.

Organized Around Learning Families and Teaching Teams

Schools that mirror families tend to be places where learning occurs and learners thrive. Does it make any learning sense to begin every school year with one teacher and a classroom of students who know little about each other? Does it make any sense that it often takes the first six weeks to get acquainted, find a comfortable routine, and provide

for a flow of instruction? Does it make any sense that at the end of the year teachers and students part, only to begin the next year repeating the same routine with new teachers and new groupings of students? Is this efficient? Is this effective?

On the other hand, what if learning families were organized and teacher(s) and students remained together for two or three years, each year picking up where they left off the previous year? Would time be better used? Would the school environment be more learning centered if the first weeks were not spent getting to know each other, forming social groups, and placing students in appropriate places in the instructional sequence?

The research would indicate the answer to the first set of questions is “no,” and the answer to the second set of questions is “yes.” The research would also indicate that all ages of learners would benefit from stability of groupings and better use of the time allotted for instruction.

Learning teams and teaching teams are like families. In learning families, members support each other and do what is necessary to help each succeed.

Achievement Certified by Demonstration

Learning would be defined in terms of what students know and are able to do. Achievement would be a function of the students' knowledge and skills and their abilities to apply their knowledge and skills. Credit for achievement would be earned not by time spent, but by demonstrating the knowledge, skills, and applications required to move through the sequence of instruction, to move from learning level to learning level, and to graduate.

This outline of schools for our future is not intended to be complete or comprehensive, but rather describes the essential characteristics. There are, of course, other characteristics of effective schools, but their impact on school quality is dependent on their relationship to these essential characteristics.

The next *NCSA Today* article in this series will discuss why schools for our future that embody these essential characteristics are so important for Nebraska.

SCHOOLS FOR OUR FUTURE

by Douglas D. Christensen, Ph.D.
Commissioner of Education

PART TWO: WHY DO WE NEED THEM?

This is the second in a series of three articles written especially for *NCSA Today* and devoted to *schools for our future*. The first article discussed the kind of schools we need and described a set of essential characteristics. This second article, written from a Nebraska perspective and framed in a Nebraska context, is a discussion of why we need this new generation of schools and why we need them as soon as possible. The third and final article of the series will discuss models and strategies for making the needed changes.

Before we discuss why we need these *schools for our future*, let's briefly review the essential characteristics that represent the core around which this new generation of schools should be organized and operated. There are, of course, many other components of the schooling process, but it is this core that must drive the school and serve as the center to which all other components are connected.

The *schools for our future* should be organized around seven essential characteristics. The schools should be (1) child and family centered, (2) learning and learner centered, with a (3) strong focus on the *basics plus*; they should be (4) integrated with and connected to community-based support services, (5) based on developmentally organized continuous progress, and (6) organized around learning families and teaching teams; and in these schools (7) achievement should be certified by demonstration.

Let's begin by asking "Why do we need these *schools for our future*?" and "Why are these schools important to Nebraska?"

TODAY'S STUDENTS . . .

Few would argue that students today are different from students a generation ago. Parents are concerned about differences they see not only in their children, but in society as well, because neither seems to compare to the days of their youth. Older citizens are often frightened by what they perceive to be young people living aimlessly, behaving out of control, and acting in defiance of traditional standards of acceptability, unwilling or unable to use even the most basic level of civility in their interactions with adults or each other. Experienced teachers know that students today require different professional skills, programs, and services, because they see those students exhibiting behaviors every day that were rarely seen a decade or more ago.

We can generally agree that children today are raised in different home settings, lead different family lives, and live in different kinds of communities than they did as recently

as a generation ago. They experience different childhoods than did children a generation ago because the world is just not the same place it was then. We, as adults, are vastly different today, so it should come as no surprise to see these differences in the children, who mirror us so accurately.

IN TODAY'S WORLD

This is the world experienced by our children. It underscores how and why our students are different (in case you doubt that they are). Every day in America:

- 15 children are killed by firearms;
- 2,660 are born into poverty;
- 2,883 drop out of school;
- 8,493 are reported to be abused and/or neglected.

Children today are more obese, less active, more suicidal, and less hopeful than at any previous time in our history. Approximately 21% of our children live in poverty. Of that 21% living in poverty, 57% of them live in single parent households. This was not the case a generation ago. We must accept the fact that our children today are different, but we must also accept the fact that *these are our children*.

In spite of these differences, the institutions and organizations in our society -- from churches to clubs to schools -- function much like they always have. Many of them have had remarkable staying power in spite of the massive social and economic changes taking place in our society. However, many are finding they have less ability to attract young people than they had a generation ago, and our schools are no exception.

ATTENDING TODAY'S SCHOOLS

How can we expect any of our social institutions and organizations -- including our schools -- to be places where students want to be and places where they will benefit from the programs and services -- when schools continue to operate as they were designed several generations ago? If our students are as different as we say they are, shouldn't our schools be designed to serve them better?

For the most part, we have a school calendar of 160-175 days, much like we had in 1960. We have class schedules of 45-55 minutes in length, beginning about 8:30 and ending between 3:00-3:40, much like in 1960. We have reading and writing, mathematics, sciences, and social sciences in the curriculum, as well as vocational courses and some music, art, debate, drama, health and physical education, plus a full program of interscholastic athletics, much like in 1960, with some differences in order of priorities.

In spite of the changes in the world since the flight of Sputnik, since landing an astronaut on the moon, since Vietnam, since the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, and since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and in spite of the countless other life-

altering changes we've seen, our schools have had remarkable staying power. This is not a compliment, nor is it a criticism; it is not a sign of strength, nor is it an indicator of weakness. It is simply a fact. Many of our social institutions and organizations have changed little, despite the sweeping changes in the world, and have survived. But most of them are finding it hard to attract willing participants or to effectively serve those for whom they were established, and again our schools are no exception.

THIS IS NOT YOUR FATHER'S OLDSMOBILE.

An analogy illustrates the growing differences between schools and the students they serve. Let's say school is a "round hole" system and has been for several generations.

Most students used to be "round peg" students. Therefore, most fit the system, the families from which they came fit the system, and the communities in which they lived fit the system. Students, families, and communities were once remarkably alike.

Today we still have the "round hole" system, but few students are "round peg" students -- in fact they are almost every shape **but** round. They differ because their families, their communities, and their world are increasingly diverse, stretching across demographics, economics, ideologies, social status, culture, and every other characteristic imaginable. They are not only vastly different, but they are different in the ways in which they are different. And, the result of this phenomenon is that the number of students who do not fit the system is growing rapidly, and the number of students who benefit from the system is diminishing just as rapidly.

This is where we see the value of the seven organizing principles outlined in the introduction. We must develop a system that is responsive to the students we are here to serve. The system must be adapted to students -- we must stop expecting students to be ones who do all the adapting. Certainly schools must have predetermined programs, rules, and procedures, and certainly we are not suggesting it is **only** schools that need to adapt. But if students will not come, if students will not stay when they get here, and if students are unable to learn what they need to know and be able to do while they are here, it seems that the system must make some changes.

The current organizing principles will not allow the system of schooling to make the necessary accommodations. However, the seven organizing principles of the *schools for our future* allow us to think about education and schooling in different ways. The major difference is in the way the system considers and responds to students and their families. In the *schools for our future*, students and their learning come first -- the system is built around student learning.

NEBRASKA NEEDS EVERY STUDENT TO SUCCEED

Another reason we need *schools for our future* is somewhat unique to Nebraska. We are a relatively small state in terms of population, with approximately 1.6 million people, 300,000 of them school age. With a small student population, we need as many as

possible of our 23,000 yearly graduates to be good at what they do and to develop into effective participants in the affairs of their communities, state, and nation.

However, not all of them will be successful -- some will need the continuing support of their families, friends, communities, and state. Regardless of how hard we try, there will be a certain pathology to the American dream. For children, this pathology is evident when inadequate nutrition results in poor health or when poor school attendance and poor achievement result in failure in school. This pathology is evident in those who do not graduate and/or are unable to get jobs. We must recognize that there is a cost when some are not able to function independently in the world, and we must also recognize that pathologies are very expensive.

A striking example is the cost of incarcerating individuals because of their behavior and because of the need to protect others from them -- a cost estimated at around \$28,000 per year. Five students could attend our state colleges or universities each year for the cost of incarcerating one person. For what it costs to accommodate our total prison population, 25,000 students could attend the University of Nebraska. And these calculations do not include the costs of buying the land and building the prisons in the first place. It is often said, and rightly so, "Penn State is cheaper than the state pen."

The same is true for pathologies directly related to the way we organize and operate our schools. The costs of special education are almost twice the costs of regular education. The costs of remedial programs are likewise expensive. It is always better, cheaper, and easier to keep children in their families, to feed them in nutritious ways, and to keep them at grade level. The seven operating principles of the *schools for our future* describe a school system that reduces the pathologies we now experience. Not all pathologies can be eliminated, but they can be reduced to a number that would free resources for those who need special attention.

WE'RE NUMBER ONE!

For a nation that considers itself the greatest in the world -- that wants to be the world leader in politics, human rights, and economics -- we are not distinguishing ourselves in the levels of knowledge and skills attained by our students. For a nation that wants all of its children to have the opportunity to go on to higher education, to get a good job, to have a satisfying career, and to participate in and perpetuate our unique system of democracy, we are not distinguishing ourselves.

There is no need for the basic curriculum of schools to change markedly. Students still need to be well grounded in reading, writing, and speaking, and to be competent in mathematics, sciences, and social studies. Students still need a well rounded education that includes music, the arts, health and physical education, and vocational education. Students still need to learn how to apply what they know, how to think and

solve problems, and how to get along with and work with others. Schooling needs to change little in order to find that point of balance where both *basic knowledge and skills* and *the application of the knowledge and skills* have equal importance.

AND WE WANT TO REMAIN NUMBER ONE!

Good is not enough when better is expected and needed. Good is not very distinguishable when there are others that are also “good.” Nebraska and some combination of Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, Kansas, and Colorado typically comprise the top four or five states in achievement comparisons. From time to time, and with increasing frequency, other states are joining this group. What will distinguish Nebraska from these other good states when families are thinking about a place in the Midwest to raise their children or when a business or industry is considering a relocation or expansion? It probably won’t be our geography or our temperate climate. It’s not likely to be our unique recreational opportunities. And it won’t be our educational system, because we will look just like our ever-expanding group of peers. The distinguishing factor could, however, be our educational system if we accept the premise that *good is not enough when better is expected and needed*.

Think about what would happen when a group of states moves out in front and Nebraska is not among them? Do we risk becoming a “second-tier” state because of our complacency with our current status? We need the best possible schools because they can be the factor that makes our state distinguishable and attractive. We need the best possible schools because Nebraskans simply expect the best. We work to create quality in the dimensions of our lives that are important to us, and education is one of those dimensions where Nebraskans traditionally expect the best .

ITS ABOUT FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES, ISN'T IT?

We have a long and strong tradition in Nebraska called “local control.” Most states claim to have it, especially when describing their system of education. Local control is usually defined in terms of power, control, and rights. To really understand what local control means in Nebraska, we have to go beyond these terms, because local control is not just about power, control, and rights. Nebraskans want local control not because they don’t want others to tell them what to do, not because they want individual control over everything in their lives, and not because it has been defined as some inalienable right. It is not “local control first” for most Nebraskans, but rather “family and community first.” These are things on which we place high value, things for which we will make considerable sacrifice. We want to have power and control and the right to deal with issues that affect our families and our communities. We tend to support those things that make our family lives better and our sense of community stronger, and we resist or even reject those things that diminish our sense of family and community. We resist government interference if it adds little value, has a negative effect, or significantly alters what we believe to be good about our families and our communities. For example, we resist consolidation of schools, even though we could be much more

efficient in our system, because consolidation would alter patterns and traditions of families and communities. We want our sense of family and community to be unaltered more than we want efficient schools.

Good schools benefit families and communities. Most people would agree that family life has an added dimension of quality when the children attend good schools. Likewise, communities with good schools tend to be communities where life is productive, peaceful, and satisfying. Better schools would benefit families and communities even more. The kind of schools we have described as our *schools for our future* would significantly enhance family life because the system recognizes the importance of the family to the education of the child. When family life is enhanced, community life is enhanced.

Efforts to improve our schools must be designed and energized by a "family and community first" agenda -- a strength that will carry us forward in developing the *schools for our future*. If we want schools where our students are successful in learning, schools where learning comes first, and schools where the role and importance of families and communities are respected, we need these *schools for our future* now! If we want schools that enhance the quality of life for families and communities, we need these *schools for our future* now!

SCHOOLS FOR OUR FUTURE

by Douglas D. Christensen, Ph.D.
Commissioner of Education

PART THREE: HOW DO WE GET THEM?

This is the third and final article in a series written especially for *NCSA Today* addressing *schools for our future*. The first article outlined the seven major operating principles that describe schools for our future -- the principles around which these schools should be organized -- which are:

- Child and family centered
- Learning and learner centered
- Strong focus on the *basics plus*
- Integrated/connected to community-based support services
- Developmentally organized
- Organized around learning families and teaching teams
- Achievement certified by demonstration

These principles must not only be the operating principles around which the schools for our future are organized, but they must be the concepts and practices that everyone in the school-community strives to perfect. The better the school-community is at implementing the operating principles, the more the school will empower teachers to teach effectively and students to learn effectively. If we really want schools that are ready to teach all children, and if we really believe that all children can learn more than they are now learning, we must organize and operate our schools differently than we now do.

The second article described the reasons these schools are so important to Nebraska. Not only do our children deserve the best education we can afford, but our social and economic well-being as a state depends on the quality of our schools. Just being "good enough" or "as good as our neighbors" will not distinguish our state. Nebraska could stand well above most states in the quality of education we provide for our children. Our investment in the education of our youngest people pays dividends for the future because it prepares them to be successful after high school and to become leaders who have the knowledge and skills to continue learning, to be independent and self-sustaining earners, and to be active participants in our democratic society.

HOW DO WE GET THESE SCHOOLS FOR OUR FUTURE?

This article will outline a broad strategy that includes the essential steps for implementing change in our schools and outlines the framework for adapting the change process to unique local settings and contexts. In using any change strategy it is important to first note the critical role of models in guiding the change process. Models help participants "see" the big picture and visualize the direction the change is headed.

Models are constructed and communicated in a variety of ways. They can be described by words and phrases, portrayed by visual images or symbols, and outlined by steps or guiding strategies. In fact, the more of these elements models have, the better they are able to communicate and the more powerful they become as tools to guide the change process. The most powerful models have an image that can be quickly identified, visualized, and internalized. They identify key concepts through expressive words and phrases and give some sense of what steps need to be taken to implement change, but it is also important to note that the most powerful models are those that guide rather than prescribe. Models must leave plenty of room for the practitioner to modify and adapt as needs emerge, as conditions dictate, and as knowledge and skill evolve.

Models have the ability to guide and empower participants in the change process because they do three things. First, they identify key concepts which form the core of the innovation. Second, they identify basic processes, practices, or steps to follow in the implementation process. And third, they create connections among the key ideas and concepts, often in ways that are compelling and creative, that are essential for implementation.

High Performance Learning (HPL), for example, is a powerful model used in some school districts and by the Department of Education because it provides a sense of direction. The model is visual (the triangle), it incorporates key words and phrases (quality, equity, and accountability), and it includes a framework of steps to begin the school improvement process (strategic planning, effective schools, and performance based teaching and learning).

In addition, the HPL model identifies key concepts and connects them in creative and compelling ways. For example, the connection of accountability with quality learning and equity identifies accountability as responsible for driving the results of education (quality learning) and for creating the conditions under which all students are able to learn (equity). The model also identifies the critical relationship between school improvement and equity through the body of research known as "effective schools," which outlines the essential condition of schooling -- removing barriers to student learning and creating a teaching-learning environment in which all students are able to learn more.

Within the framework of the four-part strategy, there is plenty of room for existing models that can be adapted to meet local needs, as well as those models created at the local level.

Models represent the reality -- the ideal state -- the place you want to be -- and it is important to spend time discussing various models to determine whether adapting an existing model or creating a new model will best meet local needs.

FIRST: A CLEAR AND COMPELLING VISION

The first part of the strategy is to create a clear and compelling vision. Having a vision is vital to the change process. Many change efforts fail, not from lack of effort on the part of

the participants, but more often from inability to see the big picture. When participants are unable to see the big picture, they have few choices other than to "do their own thing" -- do what they feel is best based on their own individual vision -- or wait to be told what to do next. Neither is an effective strategy for creating change. The vision is a description of the end result. The reality of where the process is headed can be communicated through key words or phrases, visuals or symbols, narrative texts or guiding steps, or strategies.

In this case, the vision we are talking about is a vision of education. *What does it mean to be educated?* is the key question. *What does it mean to have learned? What does it mean to know mathematics, to be able to read and write effectively, to know science, history, geography and economics? What does it mean to be fit and well? What does it mean to appreciate the arts? What does it mean to be "prepared" to continue learning, "prepared" to enter the world of work, and "prepared" to be a participant in our democratic society?*

In creating this clear and compelling vision, we are describing what is to happen to the student and what the student is to know and be able to do as a result of having participated in the educational process. The vision is one of an "education" and/or an "educated person." It differs significantly from most of our current visions, because they are often visions of schooling and what school is to look like, usually expressed in terms of such things as graduation requirements, credits, or diplomas, all of which are based on time and not on results or outcomes.

Once we have developed a clear vision, it will be compelling because it will describe the students we want to see coming out of our schools by describing what they know and can do -- their levels of competence in terms of knowledge, skills, and application. It will describe how well they are prepared to take the steps all students must take upon leaving the K-12 system -- steps into the roles of learner, worker, and citizen.

SECOND: SCHOOLING TO MATCH THE VISION

Once we have this clear vision, our second strategy is to create a system of schooling driven by the vision. The essential question to be answered in the second phase is: *If this is the kind of student we want to see coming out of our schools, how do we create the kind of school where all students have the opportunity to learn this knowledge, these skills, and these applications?* Also included in this strategy are answers to questions like these: *What does a school look like when the vision is focused on the result (education) and not on the process (schooling)? What does teaching look like in this school? Can we really teach all students, and what does that look like? How would things like school calendars, class schedules, and courses be different in this school?* All these questions and many others need to be answered in this phase.

A critical issue needs to be raised here. The current operating principles of schooling must be changed to the ones we outlined in the first article. We cannot get the kind of schools

we need, where all students are challenged to learn more, by just fixing the old model. The questions outlined above must be answered in the context of the seven operating principles of the *schools for our future*, or all we will be doing is attempting to fix the current schooling model, which is already not working for a growing number of students (see the second article of this series).

The current schooling model is essentially driven by time, and teachers are expected to teach and students are expected to learn as much as they can in the time provided. What's wrong with this? It forces learning to be a condition of time, not a condition of the efforts of students or the professional strategies of teachers. In schools today, we hold time constant and allow the learning of students to vary. While teaching and learning will always have a time element associated with it, the schools for our future must provide for time to be a variable. Our new and compelling vision of an educated person is one we should hold constant for all learners, while we allow time and other instructional resources and strategies to vary in order to get the results that we envision. The seven operating principles of schools for our future can help to hold learning constant while allowing us to vary the resources and strategies essential to accomplish the goal.

THIRD: CONTINUOUS INNOVATION AND IMPROVEMENT

It is essential to recognize that the process of creating and implementing this new model of schooling, based on the seven operating principles, will not happen overnight, next month, or next year. It will be essential for schools implementing the principles to create processes for continuous innovation and improvement. Trying new ideas that fit the vision, that fit the community, that fit the need, is vital to the change process. No one has all the right answers, and often the best answers have to be found by letting all the players -- parents, teachers, and students -- be part of the process. Constant trying out of new ideas is essential to maintaining a vitality and excitement in the teaching and learning process. Schools that continually try new ideas tend to have school climates that are student-centered, positive, and engaging for both students and teachers. Trying out new ideas is not experimentation. Rather, those new ideas are based on the vision of education and then discussed and evaluated for their relevance to the vision and their ability to move the system closer to the vision. Therefore, it is not trial and error, but a process of continually trying out those ideas that will move the vision to reality. It is through continuous innovation, exploring and evaluating new ideas based on the vision, that improvement occurs. Without change there can be no improvement; therefore, no school can claim to be improving unless it is changing; and change requires doing things differently.

FOURTH: STRONG COMMUNITIES FOR OUR SCHOOLS

The final strategy, and probably the most important, is to create strong communities around every school. Without a strong sense of community, schools will not be able to change in ways that are meaningful or in ways that will really make a difference in what students learn. Every school is embedded in a community, and that community is its foundation for support and change.

The goal is to create a connection to the school for every adult member of the community. In districts where there are multiple elementary schools, junior high/middle schools, and high schools, it will be harder to create a sense of community around the school district, but each school site can work to provide that sense of community.

Connecting every adult to the school means finding new and innovative ways to engage the community in the school. We must move beyond Parents Night, Grandparents Day, PTA, and bake sales. These are all excellent things to do, but they often fall short of engaging the community in its schools. Parents should be involved in the teaching and learning of their children as the key decision makers and evaluators of how well the children are learning according to the standards to which the school has agreed. The general public should be continually engaged in the issues of what students should learn and how well they are learning what is expected. All members of the community should be engaged in the questions about how the resources of the community -- time, money, and personnel -- are spent in providing for schooling.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

All of this is easier said than done. Change is never easy, and it is especially difficult when many decades of our history place huge obstacles in the way of seeing and doing things differently. This series of articles has outlined a vision for the schooling process -- the seven operating principles that are essential to changing our schools in lasting and meaningful ways -- which are critical to the success of our schools in engaging all students in the learning process. They are essential to ensuring that all students will have the best possible opportunity to learn all they are capable of learning.

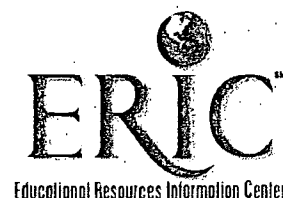
Anyone who spends time in schools quickly realizes three things. *First, our schools are in pretty good shape.* In most schools, our teachers are teaching, our children are learning, and our schools are safe places to be. *Second, the professional expertise in our schools can make these schools for our future a reality.* If we provide the time and resources necessary, our professional educators are capable of implementing these changes. *And, third, our professional educators are willing to do almost anything that will make the lives of our young people better.* They are deeply committed to children and to quality learning!

We need these schools for our future! We can create the vision; we can create a model of schooling driven by the vision and organized around the operating principles; we can create innovation and improvement; we can create strong communities around our schools; and we can create these schools for our future!

We can do this! We must!



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